"Music is a very subjective thing...."

Max Ferguson

interviewed by Barry Luft and Jim Dauncey

September 4, 1998, the day before the last Max Ferguson Show, Sheila Rogers held on her own show a Max Ferguson Retirement Party, during which she read tributes from Farley Mowat (surprise!) and Leonard Cohen (surprise!), among dozens of equally and lesser known figures; the program also featured musical requests from listeners, each chosen as emblematic of Ferguson’s role in their lives. On August 27, she’d announced the Party, noting that she had joked that "... maybe we could do a two-month tribute to Max Ferguson, rather than a two-hour.... That would be a lot easier." It would have been easier because there were that many requests and tributes to accommodate.

Perhaps not all of our readers will agree that Ferguson’s broadcasts represented folk or traditional music as we’d like to see it presented on national radio—I assume that it was Ferguson Dave Spalding had in mind last month when he referred to "the Saturday morning hit-and-miss effort"—but that Ferguson has had a significant impact upon the musical experiences of Canadians cannot be denied. Two Calgarians highly influenced by Ferguson had the opportunity to interview their hero earlier this year. Little did they know that they’d almost get a scoop. —GWL

Barry—Hello, Max, Barry Luft from Calgary. I have with me Jim Dauncey, who’s a musician. Jim appears on my CD, and he’s listened to your show for many years.

Jim—Hi, Max!

Max—Hi!

Before we start, I said I’d hunt up a photograph for you. I didn’t have any success here, but I phoned up my producer, and she got in touch with the publicity department, so they’ll be sending you whatever they’ve got.

God knows what photographs they’ll send you. Years ago, they had a bright idea, when I was doing Rawhide; they got a professional photographer in and said, "Max, run through your characters, and he’ll snap pictures." So, I’m there and doing the voice of Harold the little black widow spider with my face all twisted up, then I’d do Peter Lorre, then I’d do Granny. And for years after that, there’d be a straight feature somewhere, in the paper, about my show, and they’d run one of these idiotic pictures. And all they’d say is, "Shown above is CBC announcer Max Ferguson." Not "Max Ferguson doing a character." I hate to think what people thought of me!

I got transferred to Toronto because they heard that I was doing this Rawhide program with all these crazy characters, and they brought me up to do it with the network in 1949.

I was still on staff, doing this Rawhide show and handing it to them five days a week. I did that up to 1954 and had a little run-in with the CBC. I was fired, and I also submitted my resignation the same day, so I don’t know which crossed senior management’s desk first.

That was the end of my staff days. I thought it was a terrible risk, I had four or five of my youngsters, quite young, then. So I decided to take the plunge, and it worked out nicely because I went freelance in 1954, and they’ve been renewing my contract ever since. That summer I got my freelance contract and went back to Halifax again. Did the Rawhide show from there, plus television was just starting down there, so I had an interview program down there. Did that for about four years, which brings us up to 1958.

I came back and did some television interviewing and an evening television weather show, but still doing the Rawhide. I got sick of Rawhide about, I don’t know, it must have been about 1970, ’71....

B—Just got burned out on it? Tired of it?

M—Yeah, I just got fed up with it. Fed up with broadcasting. So I switched over to the format of taking the morning Globe and Mail and figuring out some instant satire on the news stories of the day, and I don’t know how many years I did that for, but I got completely burned out with that one and took off with just two airedales down to my little cottage at Cape Breton, thinking that I’d live there forever. That just lasted about a year and a half.

I thought it was a bit premature to cut myself off complete-
ly, so I came back—this would be about ’75 or ’76 that I got back to Toronto—and they asked me to do an afternoon interview show, and that started off nicely because they gave me a whole hour, and I liked to get just one interesting guest and spend the hour with him. That was just getting off the ground when the big NABET technicians’ strike hit.* I hung around Toronto for a while, and nothing much was happening, so I took off for a vacation in Cape Breton.

When I came back, they offered me the format I’m doing—just straight music, which is nice. It took the strain off; I didn’t have to do skits any more.

J—What year was it you started your present format?
M—That would be about ’77 or ’8.

J—And you’ve done it for 20 years since then. This is 1998, for cryin’ out loud!
M—I’ve gone through several producers. [Laughter]
B—How many times have you quit or retired in that span?
M—I quit once and was fired the same day; then I think I quit once more after that, for a short period.
B—What about plans for retiring now? Or do you want to let that cat out of the bag?
M—When is this being published, do you know?
B—Probably the Fall, middle of the Fall.
M—Oh, well, then.... Not this Saturday, but next Saturday, which is July the fourth, I’m giving my first announcement that I’m going to end the series.
J—Oh. no!
B—Oh, well, that ends this interview! [Laughter]
M—Nothing like stale news! My last show will happen to be on September the fifth. That’s the Labor Day weekend when the Fall schedule changes.

J—Well, this is wonderful, that we’re getting to talk to you, Max. We have so much to ask you and so much to tell you about.
Max, you’ve got to know, first of all, that I’m 55 years old, so I was listening to you, probably from Halifax, back in ’58. I would have been a young teenager, and that was the first time in my little home town in Saskatchewan that I ever heard any South American music. You played Los Paraguayos and those guys. That was wonderful; I must thank you for that.
I don’t remember very well. What other kinds of folk music would you have played then?
M—For quite some time, on my program, when I was doing Rawhide, I would play, not just folk music, but odd items. I remember playing a wonderful sound from, I think it was, New Guinea, where they catch a beetle, and put a tiny piece of thread around it, and they hook the other end of their thread around their two front teeth. They open their mouth, and that’s like the embouchure on a wind instrument. The beetle buzzes, and you get this wonderful psychedelic sound. A whole lot of things like that—anything unusual.

J—That reminds me. You played that woman from South America who had about four octaves in her range.
M—Yma Sumac.
J—Yma Sumac. That was the first time I ever heard her. You started influencing people’s listening very early on.
M—In those days, there wasn’t much of an outlet for.... I think Edith Fowke from Toronto, she was doing a folk music program. She was a purist. She’d get the Ozark families and put them on. I couldn’t sit through some of that. I do like a bit of melody somewhere.
But there wasn’t too much. And for oddities, the buzzing-beetle type of thing, there was certainly no program that would handle things like that.

J—Still isn’t. You do a lot of things that nobody will do or that nobody is doing.
M—I’m looking forward to getting out of the business after almost—three months short of—52 years, but I hope that the CBC, with that spot opening up, and there’s a wonderful audience—the mail that I’ve had, I get to know—sometimes I even recognize the handwriting! If they put some crazy rock show in there, they need their heads read. I don’t know who’s gonna do that show, but I hope they’ll keep that type of music going.

M—Oh, well, then Not this Saturday, but next Saturday, which is July the fourth, I’m giving my first announcement that I’m going to end the series.
J—Oh. no!
B—Oh, well, that ends this interview! [Laughter]
M—I hope there would be.
J—You’ve built an audience. You wouldn’t believe how many times when we’re in clubs and stuff here in Calgary, that people will say to me, "God, I heard the most wonderful group or tune or singer on Max the other day." Everyone always refers to the show as Max—"Oh, it’s on Max."
M—That was brought home to me just recently. When you’re in the studio, you just think that your voice is aiming at the four walls....
J—After 50 years, you still think that?
M—Well, the mail is great, but the thing that suddenly made me realize that there must be a few people listening is that I got hold of a tape and devoted the whole show to it, which was a big gamble because it was a talk given by an air controller at Birmingham....

J—I heard that!

M—Yeah, well, the biggest flood of mail came in, and everyone was wanting to know where to get this. When we finally found out who the guy was and that there was a CD available, I gave it out over the air. One woman phoned, she said it was about six o’clock her time, somewhere in the prairies, and she rang the number of, I think, RCA Victor, and when the guy answered the phone, the first thing he said was, "Oh, yeah, you want to order the air controller?" I think the whole country had been phoning; they must have moved quite a few of the CDs. I got a letter from him, thanking me, and he said, "I’ve decided to stay with the air controller business until I get it right."**

J—When you started the present format, was the material you played from your own collection?

M—Sam Sniderman, Sam the Record Man, years ago—I was transferred as I mentioned to Halifax, and they said, "We'd like you to keep doing the Rawhide show." So, people would give me suggestions, and then I’d go into some of the record stores on Bloor Street, but if you didn’t have the label and serial number, they wouldn’t help.

Sam started off on 714 College Street, a little hole in the wall. My first encounter with him, someone had said that they’d love to hear the Surface Cruising Song of German U-boats. They’d come up a nights to charge their batteries, and they had this haunting piece of music. So Sam came over, and I introduced myself, and I told him what I was doing. He said, "Anything you want to take out of this store is fine," and I said, "Well, how about this one? The Surface Cruising Song of German U-boats?" And he said, "Give me a minute." He went down to the basement. Half the stuff wasn’t even unpacked. And, by God, he came up with a 78 in its little paper jacket. I had just enough time to read Surface Cruising Song of German U-boats, and he reached to pull it out, and only half came out! He had one copy of it! The National Film Board had done a documentary, and I don’t know where they got it from originally, but they arranged to have this thing made. No other copy never turned up.

But Sam would get anything for me. I did this for years. I’d go in and take anything I wanted. I’d bring them back eventually. He suddenly grew into a great big empire.

I hadn’t seen Sam for years. I used to go down to his Yonge Street store in Toronto, and they weren’t too helpful, so I thought, "There goes my big source." Well, all of a sudden, I start getting homemade tapes, and then cassettes, and then into the CD era, of new groups starting up.
M—Yeah, and that is what’s kept me going. I get about 30 every week, and out of those maybe I pull about eight or ten. And out of perhaps twelve tracks on a CD, maybe I can use four. Then I consider myself lucky. I can remember back to the Rawhide days, as July first neared, I used to try to put together an all-Canadian program, and it was just like pulling hen’s teeth, trying to find…. And now, I’ve had to discard—I can only fit in so many. The field has grown so rapidly that I have to pick and choose and discard things I’d really like to use on that particular occasion.

J—You have to realize how wonderful it is for people that you’re doing this.

M—It’s a two-way street. I appreciate them sending this stuff in to me, and I get a great satisfaction out of giving them some air time and helping them to get known a bit. I think the classic example was this tape that came in a few years ago from this gal named Loreena McKennitt, and I pushed her stuff and gave her a bit of help in getting known, and away she went from there.

B—You’ve just sort of led into the next point here. We really appreciate the fact that Canadians, including western Canadians, get played on your show, and although you don’t call your show a folk music show, you have more good folk music, and Canadian stuff, that’s not even heard on so-called folk radio shows in other places. You seem to have a good respect for the non-stars in the folk scene and other musicians who are trying to get started.

M—It’s really exciting to recognize, again, I’m speaking subjectively, what I consider talent…. The west is just tremendous. There’s a bit of a gap here in Ontario, I find, and Quebec is pretty sparse, then it picks up again in the Maritimes. But, you know, British Columbia and the prairie provinces have got so many groups…..

J—You have to take credit for it. When Barry finished his last CD, we listened to one cut, and we said, "We can’t wait to hear that on Max!" All over western Canada, people are saying that.

M—There are a lot of pop groups, rock groups, who hear about my show and send me tapes, and I plow through about ten of these and can’t find anything that fits. And then I pick up a group that’s doing interesting arrangements of old traditional music, and I find myself muttering, "God bless you!" when I find one of these little gems after a bad run of CDs. That’s why I say I feel so indebted to them. I never think about what I’m doing for them.

B—Can I take you back to the ’50s and ’60’s, when the folk music revival was happening? Some people call it the folk scare of the 50’s and 60’s. What were you doing in those years?

M—’50 to ’54, I was here in Toronto.

J—So, that was Weavers time.

M—Right. And then Halifax ’54 to ’58.

J—So that’s getting close to Kingston Trio time.

B—Were you listening to these kinds of groups?

M—Kingston Trio, yes. I had played them, but I thought they were a little bit commercial. I preferred the Weavers to the Kingston Trio, though I must admit they did some nice stuff. Do you know Fiona Blackburn? She’s a classic example of someone taking old tunes that I have played so often, things like "Maire’s Wedding." She’s got two arrangers, well, they’re her studio musicians, but they also arrange, and it’s just great, what they do with it. It’s a modern kind of an arrangement, and yet you still have the basic melody going through it. It’s like hearing it for the first time. I’ve often mentioned that on air. And a lot of groups are doing that.

J—About the time I was listening to you, or a couple of years before that, I was eleven or twelve, Alan Mills did a show.

M—Yes, that’s right, I think it was on a Sunday.

J—Was there any communication between you and Alan Mills regarding the music of the day, folk music, that kind of thing?

M—No, I’d met him a few times. I’d gone to Montreal, and I met him, and we talked about folk music and folk singers.

My all time favorite male folk singer—he’s a terror as a human being—but that’s Ed McCurdy. He’s in Halifax now; he’s had about everything happen to him that can happen to a human being: strokes, bypasses…. But Ed in his prime was my idea of a great singer—he had about five different styles of voice. Doing a Newfoundland song, he’d put this rough edge on, or a cowboy song, put a little nasal in. Then he had what he called his "phony Juilliard baritone"! He had a nice—he called it "crooning"—little gentle things like "The Colorado Trail." He would just sing in, not quite a falsetto, but they were sensitive renditions.

J—And in the Don Messer and Singalong Jubilee days of early television, were you around those guys?

M—Oh, yeah. I knew them all. Especially Charlie. They had a big role in Halifax, if you could smell alcohol on Charlie, you could let him do both. They had two categories; I guess if you couldn’t smell anything at all, you could let him do both. [Laughter]

My mother lived to an old age in London, Ontario, and she wrote me a letter once saying that she just loved Marg Osborne and Charlie Chamberlain, particularly the way that Charlie looked up when he was singing hymns. Looking heavenwards? Well, he was studying an idiot card hanging up there.
ended or do you see the revival still going on?

M—I think that all the groups I have used have pretty well tapped the traditional folk field now. There will be a good while yet when they will do, what I’ve spoken of, of making interesting arrangements and instrumentation of these things. After that, I think, there’s still another cycle to appear, and that is, guys like Alistair McGillivray down in Cape Breton, and there are a couple of guys in Newfoundland, who are writing the most beautiful stuff.

J—Evans and Doherty?

M—No. They’re doing some nice stuff, too, but they’re in Halifax. I can’t remember their names. I know the song that impressed me that this guy wrote, “Rowan’s Green,” and Phyllis Morrisey recorded it. She’s in St. John’s. There are an awful lot that are writing folk music that you would swear was a hundred years old. I think that’s going to burgeon in the next few years.

J—Do you ever come out here?

M—I haven’t done much travelling for ages. They shoved me down to Halifax recently, but I haven’t been out west in ages. In the Rawhide days, they sent me all over the place, all the western cities, then up into the Yukon, but since I’ve been doing this format, they haven’t suggested much travelling around.

J—Do you get to many live folk music events out there?

M—No, don’t.

J—Is that by choice?

M—It’d be a kind of busman’s holiday, I think. I get invitations, but I’m tucked out here in the country. The local group, Tanglefoot, a propos of what I was saying of current composers writing stuff that could pass as folk music, these two guys, Joe Grant and Steve Ritchie they’re taking bits of Canadian history, which I really admire. I’m playing one this Saturday, “Secord’s Warning.”

J—Bill Gallaher from Victoria does that, too.

M—Yes, “The Last Battle,” that’s haunting.... A great chapter of Canadian history. You know, they are finally going to get around to exonerating Louis Riel.

B—They’re working on it!

J—Do you think Stuart Maclean could do your show?

M—He sounds so much like Garrison Keillor.... I’m just fascinated; I close my eyes, and I can see Garrison Keillor. Well, he would be a good contender, certainly.

Music is a very subjective thing. You get a guy that can come in and know the folk field and might play just the stuff that I reject, and vice versa.

J—When you first started your present format, who instigated that? Was it you, or did CBC say, “We need this folk show?”

M—No, I started Rawhide in ’46; in ’49, they transferred me here, ostensibly as a staff announcer. When I got here, they said they wanted the Rawhide show. At this stage—Rawhide started when I first got there. I went in to do my shift, and there was a program called After Breakfast Breakdown, with all these drugstore cowboys, Hank Snow, and, well, Wilf Carter was a legitimate cowboy.... And I got stuck with this, and I hate this—I love stuff like Sons of the Pioneers and legitimate songs from the old pioneer days, but this phony stuff.... And I played it under duress, and finally I got fed up one morning, and, as Rawhide, I said, “Which would you prefer? I’d like to hear from you. Would you like to hear this?” And I put on the worst cowboy song I could find. “Or this?” And I put on, I forget what it was, some folk song done by a choir. And I couldn’t believe the mail response that came in, overwhelming. “We’ve been almost embarrassed to write to you about this cowboy music, but why don’t you switch?” So that was the green light for me.

J—But after you came back in ’78 or so, what caused you to bring that back as almost pure folk music? Was that their idea, or was that yours?

M—That was my idea. By that time I was infiltrating a great deal of folk music into my program, along with crazy novelty items, things like that. The very fact that folk music has survived for so many years is indicative of its value. Pop music—you have a great influx of it, of a piece of music, then it’s gone. Rarely turns up again. But folk music has survived the
test of time. There's something honest about it that I like.

J—We go in cycles, and we sometimes go in different directions—have you got a pet musical direction you're going?

M—The thing I like right now, there's a group in Scotland doing it, and there's a group out in Hornby Island—they go under the name Sunyatta. They are doing remarkable stuff, quite heavily flamenco flavored, and I'm waiting for them to get another CD out. The other group is a group called Mac Umba in Glasgow, and they have twelve members, and they play things like "Scots Wha Hae" with bongo drums; it's this crazy fusion of culture. Sunyatta are kind of doing the same thing. But there's some guitar work that these guys out in the Gulf Islands do that's just incredible.

I've got a technician; I think he knows more about folk music than I do. And when I put the Sunyatta on, he goes into a real trance. Rises up out of his chair....

Sunyatta—I don't suppose you'd call it folk music. Well, I suppose it could be South American folk music. It's just so energetic; it's electrifying.

B—I want to read a quote from Maclean's in 1976. I assume it's accurate. "I believe in national radio, but I don't believe in the way it's being run." Do you hold the same view today?

M—They talk about the golden days of radio at the CBC, back in the 50s, 60s. And there were some good things, especially in the drama field, but, by God, they piped up four soap serials, took up the whole afternoon. The mornings, they piped up Don McNeil's Breakfast Club from Chicago. "Let's all march around the breakfast table!" I was just getting fed up with this invasion of garbage.

Plus, I had no use for CBC management. Now, I can say this because I think the CBC management now—I don't see as much of them, thank God!—but they're a different bunch of people. In the old days, they would be wandering around the studio, drunk. They were the most incompetent bunch, and when I left, as I thought, to go off forever, Maclean's magazine phoned me to do an interview. We walked around a park in Toronto. I was really steamed up, and I said, "The CBC management consists of drunks, cheats, and incompetents." So the eager reporter, his eyes sparkled, and he said, "You got any names to go with that?" Such a fool I was, I said, "The chief drunk is Such-and-such. And So-and-so sends his secretary down to pick up phony restaurant chits." I didn't give a damn if they printed those or not. I took off to Halifax. When I got there, I got a copy of Maclean's, and they had taken all the names out. But I was told that, even without the names—there was one guy that I liked, he was regional director for the Maritimes, and he told me, "Your name is mud in the CBC." And I said, "Is that right?" [Chuckles]

That was the state of the CBC in those days. I think they're more efficient now. At least, I like to think that. When I was on the announcer staff, doing Rawhide, sometimes—sometimes? just about every time!—I'd get the evening shift, six p.m. to midnight. The night manager came up to me one night, "Jeez, I gotta take a taxi slip up to our head of Personnel and Administration."

I said, "Well, what's the matter with that?"

He says, "Well, jeez, he has these prostitutes up in his office every night, and he wants to send 'em home in a taxi."

And I said, "Well, why don't you refuse?"

"He said he'd fire me if I didn't bring it up."

There were about five of us in the studio, and I said, "Well, we'll go up with you."

"Oh, no, I don't want to make waves."

This is the kind of thing that was going on. They wouldn't dare do that now.

B—You've referred several times to the letters that you get. Could you elaborate on what your fans say they like about the show? Is there anything they dislike?

M—I guess the first thing that comes to mind is the gratification I get when something bowls me over, and I test the waters with it and get a good response: It seems to suggest that I am clicking with a good many people. Again, referring to how subjective music is.

What else? I think the negative letters have stopped!

J—You've played now, on your shows, 78s, 45s, LPs, eight-tracks, cassettes, and CDs. That's fantastic, isn't it?

B—Any wax cylinders?

M—No. I think that's about the only thing I've missed. [Laughter]

B—Thank you, Max. Good luck in your retirement, and thanks for your great show.

—June 25, 1998

Notes

*NABET refers to the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians.

**Dave Gunson’s comic speech to a group of bankers (!!!) at Birmingham, England, was released on in England on the Big Ben label (BBCD12) under the title What Goes Up Might Come Down. It is imported to Canada by the Rare Cuts Music Club (1-877-222-3020), who tell us that the demand for the disc (a cassette is also available) is intense.